

Des Moines Register

INDIANOLA

Community policing models guide officers in Indianola, Norwalk

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Published 2:46 p.m. CT Jun. 12, 2020

Protests following the death of George Floyd at the hands of police in Minneapolis have spread across the nation and sparked a new conversation about the role police departments play in American cities.

In the future, major police departments may follow an approach more like the community policing models used in the smaller cities of Indianola and Norwalk.

"This is like nothing I've seen during my career," Indianola Police Chief Dave Button said. "These protests have gone global, and are generating talk and action that has been too long in coming. The majority of the protests and protesters are peaceful and I'm glad to police a community where that has been the case as well."

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In Norwalk, Police Chief Greg Staples has actively worked to build a department based on the concept of community policing and providing to citizens the type of service they want from a department.

"As I watched the protests play out I couldn't help but think that this was an extreme example of this notion," Staples said. "My job as police chief is to figure out what are the boundaries of what the community wants, needs from the police department and then figure out how to provide that service in a manner that is acceptable to the community. If the community is a customer paying for a service that is provided by the police, shouldn't the customer have a say in how that service is provided?"

One of the messages coming out of the national and international protests is the need for police departments to be more a part of the communities they serve and protect. This is an

approach well established in cities like Indianola and Norwalk.

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"We try to be as involved in the community as possible," Button said. "We established a non-profit, IPD COP, which stands for Indianola Police Department Community Outreach Partner. Funds raised for IPD COP allow us to provide holiday meals to families in need, take youth Christmas shopping, fishing and to I-Cubs games and we annually host a breakfast that we serve at the America Legion."

Not all efforts are as organized as the Christmas shopping program. Sometimes the best interactions are impromptu exchanges, Button said.

"We encourage our officers to be as engaging as they can be," Button said. "Two of our officers were featured on television (in 2018) playing an impromptu game of basketball with Simpson (College) students. Our department also put out a video to Michael Jackson's 'Black or White' which generated many positive comments, and we also made a Christmas 'Grinch' video."

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In Norwalk, officers become part of the neighborhoods through programs like Front Porch Norwalk. Staples said the program grew from a conversation he had with a resident, Judith Corcoran, who wanted to enhance the person-to-person connections between neighbors.

"Now, on three designated nights during the summer, neighbors all over the city hold front porch gatherings and the police come by to say hello," Staples said. "We answer questions, talk about random topics, give information and receive information, hang out with the kids, have fun and create a human connection at the same time."

Connecting with children is one of the most important goals of the Front Porch project, Staples said. "The fastest way to a community's heart is through its children is something I believe in. We work very hard to try and interact, in a positive way, with every school-aged student, every year."

Button and Staples said the smaller size of the communities like Indianola and Norwalk compared to cities like Des Moines or Minneapolis plays well into the community policing model.

"I've worked in both a large and small agency during my career," Staples said. "While I made great community connections in my previous department, I have much greater and deeper connections here in Norwalk. In a larger area there is so much going on some things get lost in the shuffle. An officer in Norwalk generally has the time to stop and chat with a resident out on the sidewalk. They have time to stop and play catch with the neighborhood kids and they have time to devote to making sure that each person who contacts the police gets the complete service."

Button noted person-to-person connections can be easier to achieve in smaller cities.

"There is a familiarity factor here that probably doesn't exist in larger towns," Button said. "The lack of diversity in smaller towns could potentially create problems as officers' perceptions of people may not come from first-hand experiences afforded those in larger, more diverse areas."

Beyond community policing, Norwalk and Indianola also have already instituted many of the rules and regulations concerning the use of force being called for following Floyd's death.

"We have a duty to intervene when one officer sees another doing something excessive," Staples said about Norwalk's rules about the use of force.

Staples made his comments just days before Iowa Gov. Kim Reynolds signed a law banning most choke holds and addressing police misconduct.

Staples said all uses of force by officers are required to be documented in an incident report and are reviewed by a supervisor to ensure the actions were consistent with policy and training, Staples said.

"The written policy must be sound, legally justified and be consistent with community expectations," Stable said. "The training on the policy must be pertinent, appropriate and comprehensive enough that the officers understand the policy and can translate the academic learning of the policy to how they perform in the field."

Staples said Norwalk officers train on the use of force at least twice a year with both classroom instruction and hands-on activities. "Deadly or lethal force is a last resort," he said. "We are trained this way."

Ultimately, community policing is about building human connections, Staples said.

"At its core, achieving a connection with the community involves being a normal human being and acting like it in uniform," Staples said. "Removing the mystery of what's behind the

uniform and the badge and letting people know that just because I am in uniform and have legislated authority doesn't mean that I'm not a normal human being at work doing what I'm supposed to do."